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ABSTRACT

Research in Health Professional Education is performed by (1) Directors of Offices of Research in Education, (2) Behavioral Scientists employed by Health Professional schools in faculty positions, and (3) Behavioral Scientists brought in as consultants. Research conducted by Directors of Offices of Research in Education is probably of most use to their institutions because of their knowledge of the needs of their schools and because of their service orientation. Some areas in which research is being conducted are: (1) studies of selection, (2) studies of personality, (3) studies of curriculum, and (4) evaluative studies. The latter 2 are most likely to be supported by the school, and thus are most likely to be engaged in. Whichever areas are chosen will depend on how the faculty and administration perceive the needs of the institution and the function of the Office of Research in Education. Research investigating the worth of innovative teaching methods or materials may have to be supported by outside funds. (Author)

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Abstract

Administrative Considerations in Research in Education for the Health Professions

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Administrative Considerations in Research in Education for the Health Professions

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Those of us who do research in education for the health professions usually occupy one of three roles within a training institution. 1) We have been designated as directors or chairmen of offices or departments of research in education. If we occupy this sort of position we generally have had some special training ranging from a few weeks to a full Ph.D. program, and/or perhaps a post-doctoral training program in education. 2) We are psychologists, sociologists or psychiatrists whose normal area of research would be in human behavior but who have a special interest in the relationship of psychological or sociological variables to education for the health professions. 3) We may be employed in a non-health profession setting and be called in as consultants to help professional schools. I will limit myself to discussing the person whose full time responsibility is research in health professional education.

The person with the greatest freedom to develop research along his own lines of interest is the person in position two, who has not been employed to do research in education for the health professions, but to

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teach or do research in another area. But the person in the best position to do research which will be of real use to his school is the person in position one, the Director of the Office of Research in Education, since he will have an awareness of the needs, values, and problems of his school, its administration, faculty, and students which the other two could not possess. In order for this awareness to develop he must be very much involved in the day-to-day life of the school. He should serve as a member of or consultant to every committee which considers educational matters, including the admissions and promotions committees. He should sit in on all faculty meetings, and if it is not possible for him to sit in on executive faculty meetings, he should at least see the minutes. Close contact with students is also important. This has to be planned on an informal basis, but it is important. Free coffee and an office in the mainstream of traffic can be a help.

The following are areas of research which could be conducted by offices of research in education for the health professions:

1. Studies of selection. Certainly every school should know how good the predictors they use are for predicting success at their school. Such studies are fairly simple, but if the administration of your school does not feel that the selection procedure is critical, then you would do well not to invest your resources in research in this area.

2. Studies of personality are certainly another legitimate area for the behavioral scientist; the sociologist, the psychologist or the educational psychologist. The AAMC has recently run a few seminars on this subject. However, you might not be able to get administrative support for investigations of the relationship of personalities of students to behavior, choice of career or other variables. This sort of study can more

likely be undertaken by teaching personnel in conjunction with your office under outside funding, if necessary.

3. Curriculum. This is an area in which most schools will be very happy to support research. Problems will lie in your ability to collect truly useful data, while at the same time serving the function of helping faculty develop curriculum. This problem is touched on at length in the PDK book Educational Evaluation and Decision Making.(1) Your major role, if you are in an office of research in education, is to assist the faculty in improving instruction, not to study the process of improving instruction. If this is what you wish to study, you may have to use a participant observation technique.

Evaluation is an area in which you can do research. However, you should be aware of how information you gather will be used before you gather it. It will be necessary for you to inquire rather carefully about the history of your institution so that you do not inadvertently supply information which could endanger an individual's career or a department's existence, or fail to supply information which could preserve it. If you use students, either in interviews or with questionnaires, then you must see to it that the students get as much feedback as they can from the information they give you. They must be assured that their giving of information pays off for them. If, for several years running, a course is rated very poorly but is not changed, then students will feel that filling out your questionnaire is a waste of time and will refuse to do so. The same is true of faculty. If your evaluative efforts do not supply them with useful information, they will be reluctant to cooperate in the gathering of data.

4. Projects. If faculty members come to discuss ideas with you,

an innovative way of teaching for instance, and you design a method of evaluating its effectiveness, you may also have to secure funds to support the innovation and its evaluation. This type of research is probably most satisfying professionally, but it is dependent on the inventiveness of your faculty and their willingness to allow you to control the gathering of data and the conduct of the experiment itself. If, for instance, you have randomly assigned students to treatments you'll want to know that the instructor doesn't reassign on the basis of student preference.

5. And then there's <u>other</u>. Beware of other. You'll find if you are at all creative that you will be having many ideas for research projects. But if you want to continue to function within your institution, be sure that any research you do will be of benefit to your institution, not just of interest to you, for you are primarily a service person. If you engage in research which is perceived as not relevant to the needs of your institution you may not stay there long. You are existing in a world of people not trained in your field, people who do not read your journals or go to your meetings. They are not capable of judging the quality of your research either methodologically, historically or from any other standpoint. The only real standard they can use is that of relevance to the institution and that's what they will use.

Martin Trow (2) says it in a different way, adding a caution or two of his own:

"What is important is that the research be seen to be in the service of the innovative enterprise, and not sitting in judgment on it. And for that, it must accept its own tentativeness and function as a facility of the faculty not as a part of the administrative apparatus. Formal status of the researcher or the research group, who employs him, to whom he

addresses his findings, and how he avoids being drawn into academic controversies, are crucial here,... (p. 303)".

References

(1) Educational Evaluation and Decision Making, Phi Delta Kappa Committee on Evaluation. F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1971.

(2) Trow, Martin, "Methodological Problems in the Evaluation of Innovation" in The Evaluation of Instruction. Wittrock and Wiley eds. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.